

I EPIPHANY V 7 February 2021

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

Isaiah 40.21-31; Psalm 147.1-12, 21c; I Corinthians 9.16-23; Mark 1.29-39

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

In the name of God

When Fr David generously invited me to preach on this morning, I looked at the readings and warned him that I would not wade too deeply into the waters of First Corinthians There, St Paul is responding to a number of things that he has heard are happening in the Church in Corinth. He is giving advice and admonition (lots of admonition ...) with regard to particular matters facing a Church that his preaching had created a few years earlier. Paul is a passionate man and he is disturbed that they are quarreling with one another because some have strayed from his teachings. And because he writes so fervently and at such length, it can be difficult fully to explain the short bits from his letters that we hear on Sunday mornings.

And the reading that we hear on this morning falls into that vexatious category: we can get so caught up in Paul's confusing turbulence that we lose sight of what the other writers that we hear on this morning are telling us, things that may at the moment seem more timely to our own circumstances. We may even overlook the extraordinary things that St Mark's Gospel is today proclaiming.

Jesus has just brought his newly-called disciples --Andrew and Peter, James and John-- to Capernaum where a raving man interrupts his teaching in the synagogue. Jesus rebukes the spirit that has distorted the man's personality and life, those in the synagogue are amazed, and we hear that at once Jesus' begins to spread throughout the surrounding region.

The passage that we have just heard continues the story: the disciples and Jesus leave the synagogue, go to Peter's house where Peter's mother-in-law is sick, and Jesus takes her hand and heals her. She at once welcomes them with hospitality, and by evening word of all this has also spread. The whole city has gathered at the house, bringing along with them everyone they know who is suffering mentally or physically. Jesus heals them all, and in the morning he seeks out a quiet place to pray. In the meantime his fame has increased still more, and the four astonished disciples go in search of him and tell him that 'everyone is searching for you' --probably out-of-towners have arrived with still more sick people.

But Jesus says that they need to keep moving because his mission is to proclaim 'the message' --of *metanoia*, of 'repent', of 'change', of 'try again'-- and to heal. And look at what

Mark in his breathless way has just told us, what he will keep on telling us, breathlessly, throughout his Gospel.

In the first place, there is 'the message' --*metanoia*, repentance, changing, beginning all over, is imperative and is connected to healing. In the synagogue, everyone understands the raving man to have 'an unclean spirit' (and probably his own sinful fault), and Jesus' response is, No, he can change. The spirit recognizes who Jesus is, even though no one else, not even the four first disciples, understands, and so there is something obvious, obviously different and commanding attention, about Jesus.

All of this means that Jesus begins at once to gain in celebrity: he quickly becomes famous and attracts large crowds who are eager to see him, to listen to him, to watch what he can do, and hoping to find out if he will heal them as well. From the outset, Mark is clear that Jesus is dangerous and attracts large crowds whom those in authority, in particular the Temple authorities, fear. Something like the Crucifixion is inevitable because through Jesus people are changing without reference to the rituals of the Temple and so are threatening those in power there.

Notice also what the disciples do not notice --that Jesus seeks to begin his work with prayer and that he wants to keep moving, proclaiming and healing in as many places as he can. He is not interested in creating an alternative site to visit instead of the Temple: he is going out to the people, and his stamina for this roving ministry derives from time away, from time in silence, from time in prayer.

And look at what happens in Peter's house, how Jesus heals --changes-- Peter's mother-in-law. We did not see it in the synagogue with the raving man, but we will see it again and again in the healings that Jesus will perform later: he touches Peter's mother-in-law's hand and helps her up. He touches her, and will heal still more people with a touch. The power of touch, of human touch, is made plain.

And how does Peter's mother-in-law respond to this touch ...? As soon as her fever breaks, she extends hospitality, begins to 'serve' Jesus and the four disciples. This is not merely what girls are supposed to do when the boys come home, for the word for what she does, 'serve' them, derives from the Greek word *diakonia*, from which we get our own word 'deacon'. In the Christian scriptures and tradition, we are to understand that her holy and life-giving ministry is ... Hospitality. When healed, when changed, God summons God's people to ... Hospitality, to ministering with food and shelter.

All of this in a couple of short paragraphs, the words practically hurled onto the page so urgent is Mark's haste to tell the story. It is a story about someone uniquely compelling; relentlessly moving around; calling on people to change, to start over; touching them both with words and with human hands; and inviting them to pray, to provide healing and hospitality, to minister. Which ought to have sounded familiar to them

Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not known? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his

understanding is unsearchable . He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

With these words that we have also just heard, the prophet Isaiah consoles the Jews whom the Babylonian armies have captured and brought into exile, having destroyed Jerusalem and torn down the Temple. These dispossessed Jews feel abandoned by God, desolate in their new foreign surroundings, and Isaiah calls on them to remember that the God whom they spent so much time ignoring in Jerusalem has, in the past, acted and blessed them. Isaiah tells them that they should start looking again for God's acting and blessing. This will happen and is happening, but they have got to be willing to notice: God is not remote from their world but is, as ever, very near and active in it.

And God's actions in this world, the prophet says, are a lot like ... those of Jesus. Calling for change: become different. Called no for prayer: pray. Touch, with words and welcome. Heal, yourself and others. Serve, and keep moving, keep on serving, and God's creatures 'shall renew their strength [and] ...shall mount up with wings like eagles'.

But we have got to be willing to notice, to hear the invitations, the summonses, to pay attention to how God is acting, calling to us in this world. There are so many distractions that can divert our attentions --sometimes our own selfishness or insecurities, sometimes even the apostle Paul with his spiraling verbiage. And so sometimes we are best off just to go back to the Gospels and hear again, remember how the first disciples came to notice what was happening in front of their very eyes, in their world there and then, and how they stumbled into ... well ..., changing. Amen.